Generational Baton Pass Is Complete

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Almost two decades after it began with the election of the "Watergate babies" in 1974, the generational change in American politics was completed yesterday.

"We have changed the guard," said President Clinton, the first of the baby boomers to reach the White House.

As Clinton, 46, and Vice President Gore, 44, stood on the inaugural stand, backed by members of their White House staff looking as youthful and solemn as a high school choir, no one could doubt the change was real.

What that change means depends largely on where you stand on the generational ladder. Even on the day of celebration, it was not hard to find doubters in the older and younger generations.

"I hope they're ready," said a skeptical Lawrence Carlson, of Kansas City, 74, here to watch the inauguration with his government-employee daughter. "I worry that they maybe don't hold some of the wisdom of past generations," said Jimena Gomez-Lobo, 19, of Georgetown University. "I'm scared it is too big of a change too quickly."

But far more agreed with Clinton's contention that it was at least time that the boomers—the biggest and in some respects most coddled generation in American history—"assumed [its] new responsibilities."

"It's exciting," said Victor Ashe, 48, the Republican mayor of Knoxville, Tenn., who ran against Gore in Gore's first campaign for the Senate back in 1984. "The country is ready for it, and I think it will be good. The older generation has had its time."

That it has. From the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 through the defeat of George Bush last year, four decades of executive leadership came from men who were in uniform during World War II. They ended the war in Korea, took the country into and ought of Vietnam, managed what John F. Kennedy called the "twilight struggle" against Soviet expansionism, won the Cold War, presided over a huge growth in the nation's economy—and its debt—and survived a revolution in racial and social relations.

When Clinton saluted Bush's half-century of service—going back to his enlistment as a Navy aviator in World War II—he was giving a pat on the back to that whole generation "whose steadfastness and sacrifice,"

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he said, "triumphed over Depression, fascism and communism."

But it was also a push out the door, the final shove in a process that really began with the midterm election of 1974. One hundred ten new representatives and senators came in on that Election Day, a postwar record that would stand until 1992. For the first time since World War II, the median age in the House following the 1974 election dropped below 50. Eight of the 10 new senators were in their 30s or 40s; two of the House members barely exceeded the constitutional minimum of 25.

Among the Democrats who gained their first terms in Congress or a governorship that year were many of the names who have dominated the party's recent presidential contests—Michael S. Dukakis, Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown Jr., Gary Hart, John Glenn, Tom Harkin, Paul E. Tsongas among them. But all of them failed, as did Gore, Jesse L. Jackson, Bob Kerrey, Richard A. Gephardt, Walter F. Mondale and a dozen others who tried to be the first to break the generational barrier and enter the White House.

Ironically, Clinton, then only 28, was almost a member of that remarkable congressional class of '74. In his first try for public office, he failed by only 6,000 votes to oust Rep. John Paul Hammerschmidt (R) in the Ozarks' 3rd District. Had Clinton won that year, he might by 1992 have attained a committee chairmanship, as two of the class have done, or moved on to the Senate like nine others. But given the reputation of Congress during the 1992 campaign, he might have had great trouble vaulting from Capitol Hill to the White House.

As it was, he had no easy time persuading the country to entrust its future to a pair of 40-somethings like him and Gore. Those most skeptical of their readiness were, oddly enough, their own contemporaries. The Clinton-Gore ticket ran up its best margins among the oldest voters, the New Deal Democrats over 65, and the youngest voters, those under 30, who switched off their support of Ronald Reagan and Bush as the stagnant economy chilled their economic prospects.

But the boomers themselves—those of the 70 million born between 1946 and 1964 who voted—displayed little enthusiasm for the first all-boomer ticket they were offered. Exit polls showed voters in this age group gave more support to Ross Perot than other Americans and split their support between Clinton and Bush so evenly the electoral count might have been very close if only they had voted.

That was no surprise to Clinton campaign strategists. James Carville, the lead political consultant in the race, told the National Press Club on Tuesday, "I am not a believer in generational politics. . . . The most popular candidate with young people, in my time, was Ronald Reagan in his 70s."

In a later interview, Carville's partner, Paul Begala, was even blunter, saying, "We never thought the generational appeal would work. And we knew it would get us in trouble with older voters and younger voters—and those were our voters."

As for himself, Begala, 31, said, "I'm not part of his [Clinton's] generation and I deeply resent his generation. It's a big old garbage barge of a generation and we have had to clean up after it—the drugs, the greed, everything."

Such criticisms are not rare among the post-boomers. At a Tuesday evening seminar at George Washington University, sponsored by Lead or Leave, a youth group trying to force the new Congress and administration to reduce the budget deficit, interviews with youths in town for the inauguration showed little sense of regret at the passing of the old generation. But they had real questions about whether Clinton's generation has the wherewithal to secure their future, as Clinton has promised.

Asked, for example, about Clinton's proposal to provide college funds for anyone who is willing to give back two years of community service or a percentage of his or her future earnings, Joshua Cooper, 23, of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, said, "It's a very idealistic program, but I don't know where they're going to get the funds." And Jason Morgan, 13, of Baltimore's Saint Frances Academy, said, "It's a really good program, but not everybody is going to be willing or able to pay back, so that's money we're losing right there."

Others offer more hope. At the U.S. Conference of Mayors' pre-inaugural meeting, Columbia, S.C., Mayor Bob Coble, a 39-year-old Democrat, said he finds a spirit of "practical idealism" in his generation. "The new generation knows there isn't much money," he said, "so we have to rely on ideas. You find them bubbling up from the bottom in cities all across the country."

The evidence supports Coble's view that Clinton and Gore represent just the most visible symbols of the change sweeping through American politics and government. More than one-quarter of the governors, more than one-third of the representatives are boomers or post-boomers.